

Ensuring that women's voices are heard in Iowa communities

When a 1987 Iowa law requiring gender equity on state government's appointive boards and commissions went into effect, women occupied only 14% of the seats at the table. Today, women's voices and experiences are contributing to the state's public policy process; 49% of those volunteer governance slots are filled by women.

Now, Iowa's counties and cities are charged with bringing gender equity to local decision making.

A 2009 law that localized the scope of gender equity in Iowa went into effect on January 1, 2012. It requires "all political subdivisions of the state" to be gender balanced in their appointments to municipal commissions, committees, boards and councils. As Iowa communities work to include qualified women in these decision-making and leadership positions, the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women (ICSW) is connecting local governments with women interested in appointments.

Although women make up more than half of Iowa's population and outnumber men in 90 of Iowa's 99 counties, historically they've been underrepresented on local boards and commissions, especially those that make economic decisions for communities. Likewise, men are underrepresented on other types of councils, such as library boards and early childhood commissions. Some municipalities have had no formal application process. Some report difficulty finding local women willing to serve—even though women in Iowa volunteer at significantly higher rates than men.

*That's why Friends of the ICSW, a champion of the 2009 legislation, is **identifying women whose capabilities match local requirements** for service and **assisting local governments in how to fill available seats** with female community leaders.*

For Women

Women can contact Friends of the ICSW at friendsoficsw.org and post contact information on a database created to assist local governments in locating potential candidates for civic appointment. Iowa women also can spread the word about the database to other women in their networks, urging them to submit their credentials for opportunities to shape their local communities. Serving on local advisory and regulatory boards not only involves women in governance, it expands one's capabilities for future leadership possibilities. Being a community role model for women and girls can be a first step to increasing one's career and political opportunities.

Women are encouraged to find out how the application, nomination and confirmation processes work in their counties and communities. It is important that qualified women not underestimate their value; some seats require only that one live in a specific community. Women should apply and let local governments consider their needs against the applicant's qualifications.



Download a copy of "A Five Step Guide to City and County Boards and Commissions and How to Apply" at bit.ly/ICSWbalance.



For Local Governments

To find qualified candidates in their areas, local governments can go to the Friends of the ICSW website at friendsoficsw.org to search a database of women willing to serve locally. Contacting community clubs and organizations (even appropriate statewide organizations) about the skill set required of a potential appointee is an easy but effective way to discover new talent.



Download a copy of "Recruiting Gender Balanced Boards and Commissions: A Guide for Cities and Counties" at bit.ly/ICSWbalance.

The Guide has a number of ideas that are easy to implement and surprisingly effective.

The Iowa law states that no more than a simple majority of appointed members shall be of one gender (e.g., a commission of five can have three men and two women or three women and two men). If after 90 days of making a "good faith effort" to achieve gender balance a county or city is unable to make an appointment, the opening may be filled regardless of balance.

Examples of Boards/Commissions Charged with Gender Balance

- Planning & Development Commissions (also known as County Planning & Zoning Boards)
- Boards of Adjustment
- Compensation Boards
- Boards of Review
- Conservation Boards
- Library Boards
- Health Boards
- Parks and Recreation Boards
- Art and Music Commissions

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Who are the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women and Friends?

The Iowa Commission on the Status of Women (ICSW), an Office in the Iowa Department of Human Rights, champions the success and wellbeing of women and girls through responsive advocacy. With the commitment of seven citizen Commissioners from around the state, the Commission's vision is to grow Iowa's opportunities so that every woman and girl can reach her full potential.

The Friends of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women assists and supports the Commission in a variety of ways, including fundraising, special projects, events and other responsive, innovative activities that make a difference in the lives of Iowa's women and girls.

friends of
the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women

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Carrie Chapman Catt Center
for Women and Politics

The Friends have collaborated with the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics at Iowa State University to track and report the composition of Iowa's city and county boards and commissions. For a full report on the extent to which gender balance has been achieved, go to cattcenter.las.iastate.edu/catt-research and click on "Gender Balance Project."

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Iowa's Newest Gender Balance Law:

Achieving gender equity on local boards and commissions

